

**BRICK WORKERS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
LEWISTON-AUBURN, MAINE**

**Ralph Metayer**

*(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)*

**BWOH #13**

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**Andrea L'Hommedieu:** This is an interview for the Brick Makers Oral History Project. The date is October 15th, 2007, and I am at the Museum L-A with Ralph Metayer, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Now, could you start just by telling me a little bit about how you came to work at the brickyard?

**Ralph Metayer:** Yes. Good afternoon, Andrea. Yes, I am Ralph Metayer. I was a neighbor to the Dennis Brickyard, which, right across the field, in the five minutes, five minute walk or run, I'd be there. So, as a fourteen year old, I was hired as a sand boy, which was only a few hours per week. Also, when it got time to fire a kiln, they would line the kiln with two layers of broken bricks, bricks that hadn't been cooked enough or burned enough, and they were what they called light hard. All those were saved in a pile, and we had to, had to gather them up and line up that kiln. After that kiln was lined up with two layers of that brick, with a spacer, from the new brick, then there was, we made like an adobe, we got mud from, clay mud, with our hands, we'd plaster that whole kiln, like an adobe.

**AL:** Right, and how tall would the kilns be?

**RM:** The kilns would be, oh, like sixteen feet. Of course, there was a bench, what we call benches, there would be fire arches, where we'd feed the slabs of wood into those arches, which had a steel, cast iron cover and a cast iron arch, and the rest was made out of bricks. And there were two of those arches, for instance, would create a bench, what they called a bench, and there was about three, three feet off the ground, that was made out of old bricks, hard bricks and that would withstand the heat. Then they'd put the new brick, new manufactured brick, they'd start laying on top of that. Bricks are handled two at a time, which makes four bricks, and, and the people who were setting these kilns, they had a way of setting the kilns so that the draft, the hot draft has to go through these bricks to create an even, an even heat. So these, the bricks, as I say, are handled two by two, and when they are laid in a kiln, they, they become a block of four bricks, which in the middle of that, creates the face of the brick, and that's important because as the, as these bricks are burnt, there's a heart in those bricks, and that heart is created from the, from the chemicals in the wood. And in those days, they burned with wood slabs. Nowadays, I think it's done with oil, and oil doesn't create that –

**AL:** The color?

**RM:** The color effect. And those kilns were burnt, then the size of them was according to arches, some of them had twelve, fifteen, sixteen arches, but they were all the same, about the same height, and there was one, I cannot speak too much on that because I, one of the old pioneers, he'd be the, he'd be the head fireman. They'd start these fires slowly to get the vapor out of the bricks, because they're not thoroughly dried, there's still moisture in them, so they'd fire them a couple of days, two to three days, moderate, with moderate heat, and that, then that's, after the, the steam is out of them, you can tell by the top, then they start firing hotter, for another eight to ten days, depending on the conditions of the weather and so forth. And then the top, the head fireman, as the kiln was on its, like half burnt, they'd have to go up and walk up there on top, and close up some of the dampers, they also put bricks on top as well as the sides. And there was, they controlled the draft, because the heat goes for heat. So, if one part of the kiln was drawing all the heat, then those bricks become black, they're overdone, and they try to prevent that. So the head fireman would try to close these dampers on top, made out of bricks, just keep tossing the bricks over, so that the draft would pull the draft more even, because heat draws heat, and it's a, it's a trade in itself to control that, you know, so they could have an even burn, otherwise they have to stop, they can only burn it for so long, part of the kiln would be over burnt, real dark brick, and which is not, there's not a big demand for that. Then the rest of it would be light hard, what they'd call light hard, like an orange brick, and that brick is only sold for interior, it's no good for exterior because it absorbs too much water, and with the frost in the winter, it will just flake off. So, so that was the extent of that. So I'd work at that as a, as a kid while going to school.

**AL:** Well now, tell me what a sand boy is.

**RM:** All right, now a sand boy is a, is part of the, of course these are clay yards, nice clay yards, I'm just guessing at the land, but there were about say one hundred twenty feet long and as wide as, as they could have it. A sand boy would dry out, would spread his sand to have a dry sand, because he had a saucer, what is a screen saucer, and he'd put, we'd put some on the yard, because as these bricks are made, as the, as they dump these bricks from the molds, the sand prevents the bricks from cracking. They cannot dry too quick, or they just separate and crack. They also put some on top of the brick after the brick makers had, had dumped them, you know. So that was the, and then, of course, they had, have to keep a little supply of dry sand in the shed, a small shed, you know.

**AL:** And I forgot to ask you what your date of birth is.

**RM:** Okay, my date of birth is, I'm seventy three years old, I was born in 1934, July 11th.

**AL:** So, it was 1948 when you first worked as a sand boy?

**RM:** No, no, about '50.

**AL:** About '50?

**RM:** Nineteen fifty, yes, and '50 to '55, to, up to fifty, 1955, then I went into the service. The, now there's two types of bricks made over at Dennis Brickyard, what they call a wire cut. The wire cut was from a machine, the brick was in there, and just like a harrow from a bank, like a garden, like you would harrow a garden. These brick, I mean these clay banks would be harrowed like that, and it would scrape this and bring it onto a bridge, and a boy would, would shovel it in a dry, that's a dry pit, and that would be going through belts, which would flatten that clay out and smash it up a little bit, and then it went onto this steel blocks, which there were propellers in there to mix it, and a guy would with a regular garden hose, would put enough water in to get a good dry mix. Then it was forced through a mold, which came out as a slab, four by, four by eight slab, let's say because of the size of a brick, and then that slab would be cut with a mechanism, made up of piano wires that would slice that, that brick, and brought onto a pallet, which was just a board, and then we had wheelbarrows that would fit, I think, I believe, was seven of those pallets, I think there was eight or nine bricks to pallet. And then we'd wheel them out into what they called the racks, and those racks were about up to six foot high, I guess, and then they were laid there to, to dry. And after they were made for a few days, we'd go in there and we'd space them, we'd just with our *(unintelligible word)*, we'd space those bricks out so the air could get through them. So, that's about the story of the wire cut. Now I also worked on the striking, what they call the striking crews, it's a crew of three men.

**AL:** Yeah, and that was the hard work.

**RM:** Yes, it was, and I wasn't really, I was slim, you know, I was slim and undersized a little bit, but I had a lot of desire to, and I had a neighbor by the name of Willy Baker. He has passed away now. Willy Baker worked at Dennis Brickyard for quite a few, quite a few summers. And being a neighbor, he had the, he, he brought me in and gave me a chance, you know, otherwise I never would have made them. He, I started out, as a three man crews, and we'd take, we'd take our turn. We had a pit that was about six feet by ten feet, and about seven foot deep. That was filled, the same idea as the wire cut, the tractor would go around the clay bank and scrape, after it had been harrowed, and scrape that, that dry clay every day, and dump it on a, on a bridge, we'd call it a bridge, that we could hand shovel it in that pit, with a two inch water line from the brook. And we'd go into that box, and we'd shovel that dry clay evenly, so that it would make a good lining, so that was the first process of that, that striking crew. The following day, after that brick, after that mud had settled for say twelve hours, we'd go back in the morning, and we'd take it, put out the bricks. We'd have one guy shoveling in the pit, into this hopper, the brick machine, and two guys out front. We took our turns in the pit. We, the two guys out front, they'd put out one thousand, one thousand bricks. These were molds of six bricks to a mold, and I believe it was six, could have been seven, I think it was six bricks. Six bricks to a mold is a simple mold. The mold, the brick mold

is a very simple, it has windows of six bricks with a board, which we called a slide. Now that board, when the brick was, we'd, we'd put it into the machine, and we'd, everything was manual, so we'd have to step on what they call a machet, more or less jumped on that machet, in order to get the press down. The press would fill that mold up, and then we'd have to draw it back out, and you'd, in that, that machine had to be the plate, there was a plate in that machine that had to be set right, otherwise you'd kill yourself, because there was a lot of suction, you're trying to pull that mold back out. But the old hands at it knew, were pretty good, and they'd fix that machine up so it was, it was doable. So, we had five molds that we put on this two wheeled cart, and we'd, we'd take off with that cart, down to the other end of the yard, and start our row of one thousand. After we have the row completed one thousand, one of the guys went in the pit to shovel his, his part, and the guy from the pit would come back out to, to make, to continue the team. And we'd, a normal day was ten, ten thousand, but then after we got in shape, after a couple of weeks we'd get in shape, we'd try to get twelve thousand, you know, and in accordance to the weather, the weather had to be good too. Some summers are very rainy, we'd lose a lot of time. So, a good dry summer was good for brick making, and we'd put out about twelve thousand a day, with three, three men. At the time, 19-, say '54, they paid seven fifty a thousand, and that was split three ways. So, and the brick manufacturer, they'd get about five cents a brick in those days.

So, and of course then the sand boy, we had a sand boy, we'd, he'd keep the sand on those bricks, so that they wouldn't dry too fast. Now the following day, at the end of our day's work, the bricks had to be hicked. We had an edger, what they call an edger. We'd pick those bricks four, ten, six, twelve at a time, I believe, and we'd edge them on edge, (*unintelligible phrase*) them flat, we'd edge them on edge, and then they'd dry a little bit more, enough so that we could pick them up two by two without leaving a thumb print, a thumb print in the brick, we could not have that. But it didn't take long, they'd dry, but that was, you know, all part of the game. Again, those bricks were handled two by two, put on an eight inch plank, two inch thick, eight inch plank, and we'd, we'd hick our bricks, two by two, leave a thumb space, which prevented the air to go through them, so they'd dry. So, a hick of say five, five to six thousand would stand about four, three, three or four feet high. The (*unintelligible phrase*), if we expected rain, we had spouts, which was a canopy made like a little rooftop, it would cover probably three, three hicks, and we had to keep them covered, and uncover them back in the day, you can't, depending on the weather. Nighttime, you couldn't afford to have rain, it would spoil all those bricks. So, once in a while too, we'd get caught in the rain, and some of these bricks would get washed on the yard so bad that they had to be shoveled back into the pit, or they would, they would keep them to create bricks to line up the kiln. So, yeah, as I mentioned, during a rainstorm, a bad rainstorm, where the bricks, it would all depend on how dry they were, if the bricks had been made for, and it was good drying weather. That's another thing too, the weather was very different. A lot of people don't, don't realize that, but the weather in June, the drying time in June, is not the same as the drying time in September. September is not good drying weather. So, depending on how this, this rain would, would, rainstorm would hit these bricks,



some of the washouts on a yard were salvageable, and some were not, some were, and as I say, those bricks there were either redone, reprocessed, or they were saved to make bricks to line up the kiln.

So I had the pleasure to work with like Willy Baker and Roger Bertrand, Andy Poulin, and Harvey Desgrosseilliers, and, and there's a Freddy Littlefield. I also made bricks in Yarmouth for Fred and Bob Liberty Brickyard.

**AL:** Now, what did you do in that brickyard? What role?

**RM:** The same thing, water struck. We'd work in our bathing suit, which wasn't very pleasurable, because there's a lot of cold mornings in the state of Maine, and we'd start very early. A day's work was like starting at four thirty in the morning, so you know because we tried to get most of the work out. We tried to work it so that by eleven thirty we were done, and then we'd come back in the evening to hick our bricks, when the sun was down, because otherwise it's too much sun, you know.

**AL:** Now, do you have any recollections of stories, stories of things that happened when you were brick making? Were there any funny stories, or?

**RM:** Well, yeah, we, of course when you're young, you know, it's, life is very different, and the guys get around a lot, and we had. And of course, in the brickyards too, there were a lot of lumbermen that would work there, because there's too many flies in the woods in the winter, so they'd go work in the brickyards in the summer. Of course, these lumberjacks, they've got stories of their own, and a lot of them, some of them were pretty heavy drinkers. As a crew, I also worked with a father and son, Joel, Joel Bornson and his, his son, Leo. But that father was remarkable, well he was about sixty years old then, in his sixties, in fact, he was still making bricks, which was unusual, because the rest of us were all young people. No, Romeo was his son's name, Romeo Bornson and Joel Bornson. And of course, these guys were with the Schmidt's beer, *(unintelligible phrase)* tomatoes, *(unintelligible phrase)*, beer in the refrigerator. They'd have a sandwich, and they'd drink a bottle of beer with it, and the beer was by quarts then, there were no six packs in those days, but they had rubber caps for them.

**AL:** Now, so there were quite a few lumbermen who worked there in the summers?

**RM:** Some of them, yeah, water struck, as far as striking, yes. As far as wheeling throughout the rest of the yard, the wheelers were, there was a lot of high school guys who went out for football and people like that, they would work. Oh there was some people who would work, like there's always people who like to have two jobs. They'd work in the mill and they'd go there on Saturday, or they'd work second shift in the mill and they'd work in the morning at a brickyard. And some of them were very good men, they were dependable.

**AL:** Did they ever have, I have a question about the wood, because you used a lot of wood to fire the kiln. Was that in shortage at all, or did you feel like you -?

**RM:** Well, they stored some. Of course there were a lot of lumberyards in those days, in different towns and in different townships. So they'd buy from them and they'd store them, they'd buy some and they'd store it. They were mostly slabs, mostly *(unintelligible word)* slabs, and we used to split some, you had to split some of them, because these arches were only like a twelve foot, twelve foot wide and probably eighteen inches, or sixteen inches, high, and like a church door shape. So that wood had to fit in there. So we had to split the biggest ones, and we'd pole, we'd pole them to the middle. When they fired these kilns, we, it was like a lineup, we were five or six guys. The first guy was the poler, the guy take the doors off, and he'd put in one chunk of wood in the door and he'd go to the next door. The guy that was poling, he had to get those things up to the middle of the kiln, and he had to know his stuff because the slabs could not get jammed, you had to keep them going straight and get them all the way out to the middle, to the center of the kiln. And then the rest of the people, then there was another poler behind, he'd continue, not as far in, but until the, until these bays were all filled up with wood, and they put the door back with some adobe, seal the edge with, with clay, and that was good for, I forget, five, four, five or six hours, and then they had to do it all over again, and that went on for between ten and twelve days. So that's, I've said a lot here in such a short time. I just hope I've been accurate, because it's been quite a few years since I've done that.

**AL:** Now you mentioned some names of people who you worked with?

**RM:** Yes.

**AL:** Did you mention Andy Poulin, is that someone still living?

**RM:** Oh yes, he has worked for the, I believe, the Pennsylvania railroad, as a salaried people, person, so he doesn't, he's not around here. Roger Bertrand would probably know about his whereabouts. Then there's Bob Morin. Us three worked together, Roger, Andy Poulin. We were all in the same class at Edward Little High School. So then with the Bornsons, Romeo and Joel Bornson, his father Joel, I worked with them two or three summers, and of course we were hired as a crew. Of course it was difficult going to high school, because when the springs break out early in Maine, like in April sometimes, it only happens like every five years, but you had a good spring, they'd like, the brickyard would like to open up and get going, start producing these bricks. So, by going to school you didn't have that chance, so that's how I happened to go to Yarmouth a few summers, because I'd miss out. They'd, the brickyard would pick up their crew and you were kind of left out. So I'd go where I could.

In Yarmouth, they had a very different, they didn't build their kilns the way I just explained. They had what they called beehives. Those are permanent, permanent

kilns. They were like big igloos, you might say, and the bricks were wheeled in there. Of course at that time, they were using conveyor belts too, they started using conveyor belts, so then they were set in there the same way though, the same way as they would have been in the kiln I just mentioned, two bricks at a time.

**AL:** And the space?

**RM:** With four bricks that are stuck together so that, which would create the face, color in the face. So those beehives would operate pretty much the same way.

**AL:** Did one seem more efficient than the other, or just a different way of doing it?

**RM:** No, it's just a different way of doing it, well they didn't need all this scobin and this material to line the kiln with, so that made a difference there. And then as far as controlling the heat too, I think it must have been a lot better, because the old fashioned way with the arches and feeding the wood that way is, like I say, that the heat draws heat, and it was hard to maintain the even temperature in that kiln, in those kilns. So with a beehive, I think that they had better success, less waste.

**AL:** Is there anything I haven't asked you about brick making, that you think is important to add? I know I've asked a lot of questions.

**RM:** No, well if I bring up something, I'll come back to you, Andrea.

**AL:** Okay, sounds good. Thank you very much.

**RM:** All right.

*End of Interview*  
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